

Review: Manufacturing the Ungendered Subject

Reviewed Work(s): Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism by Michael Burawoy

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jobs and, hopefully, more sustainable economic growth?

The character of postcolonial labor processes may be shifting, incorporating a core of skilled, relatively privileged workers in a far more consensual factory regime, while further marginalizing workers who are more rural, less educated, or older—workers who may have been union stalwarts only ten years before. In both Brazil and South Africa, unionists, government officials, and forward-looking industrialists are beginning to move toward *Manufacturing Consent*, creating internal labor markets, factory-based training programs, and wage differentials based on productivity. Racial divisions persist, but discrimination is less overt and illegal. Lacking any alternative vision, unionists may find themselves narrowing their gaze to individual workers, preparing them to compete better for jobs in a savage labor market, rather than trying to build a broader working class identity.

Once, the argument contained in *Manufacturing Consent* seemed to underscore the

difference between the authoritarian, racialized labor processes of postcolonial society, and the more regulated relationships that Burawoy described at Allied. Today, however, that argument may well offer a new way to understand how shop floor relations may be redesigned in the context of neoliberal democratization, not only in South Africa and Brazil, but perhaps also in places like South Korea, India, Mexico, or the Philippines. Perhaps we are watching in process—a process interrupted by tension and conflict, a process whose outcome remains indeterminate—the emergence of the internal factory state that Burawoy described in Chicago twenty years ago. As postcolonial capitalism shifts into a new phase, reorganizing capitalist relations on the factory floor may well lead sociologists around the world to rediscover *Manufacturing Consent*—and to realize, as I have been forced to do, that there is really only one Michael Burawoy, after all.

Manufacturing the Ungendered Subject

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Manufacturing Consent is a remarkable narrative, pulling the reader along through successive layers of puzzle and response. The final product produces the satisfying feeling of inevitability that one gets in the classic modern novels. Burawoy is fundamentally interested in the way in which a particular structure of production evokes an equally particular subjectivity, in how, for instance, workers are constituted as “industrial citizens” in the mundane practices of a single arena of production (p. 119). Following the logic of this basic view of the relationship of structure to subjectivity, he argues that monopoly capitalism is based on the production of “consent” on the shop floor and delineates the local processes through which workers become complicit in their own subordination. By book’s end, he lays bare the chain of structures through which capitalism impinges and depends on shop floor experience.

The self-evident quality of these connections between capitalism and emergent shop floor subjectivities is something of a sleight of hand however. A single set of assumptions underlies his understanding of both elements, thus accounting for their perfect fit. Burawoy’s categories provide him few tools with which to recognize power structures or subjectivities, other than those related to class, operating on the shop floor. Identity categories such as gender, race, or nationality are absent from both sides of the equation.¹ As a consequence, he offers an impoverished view of shop floor subjectivity and only a partial explanation of the production of shop floor consent under capitalism.

¹ In the book’s appendix on Zambia, Burawoy provides a far more compelling narrative of racialized shop floor domination than he does in the body of the manuscript, precisely because here he understands race to be part of productive structure, rather than a mere addition to it.

The strength of Burawoy's interpretation lies in the link he makes between subjective experience and social relations. In this analysis, subjectivity is understood, not as a fixed "imported consciousness" (p. 156), but as emergent within the practices of the immediate structure of production. Gender could be accommodated within such an analytic framework if it were understood as an integral part of the social relations of production.² However, in Burawoy's complete, theoretically impelled identification of social relations with class, gender becomes extraneous.³ It is not only Burawoy's notion of structure that excludes gender. Despite the causal logic of the argument, in which social relations evoke subjectivity and not vice versa, the argument is based on a deeper set of assumptions about human subjectivity as well. Located squarely within a Marxist framework, subjectivity is understood as the distinctively human desire to creatively transform nature.⁴ Race (and implicitly gender) affect consciousness, but they are not at the root of what motivates human behavior. Given this definition, Burawoy takes for granted that subjectivity in operation on the shop floor is that of the would-be creator, the worker. And this in turn has repercussions for his notion of social relations, as effective labor control can only operate by definition when workers' "true subjectivities" are addressed. Hence, insofar as these practices are effective, they must refer to class identities. Within this framework, in which social relations and subjectivities are so closely bound, the impermeability of each of the pair reinforces that of the other.

This internally reinforcing cycle is further sustained by Burawoy's explicit focus on prac-

tices rather than the meanings subjects make of them.⁵ As an ethnographer, Burawoy insists that we must investigate actions not words, and that insofar as workers produce profits, the meanings they make of the process are not fundamentally of analytic interest. This is evident in his primary focus on "consent," which he takes care to distinguish from "legitimacy." Consent deals with "the organization of activities," he argues, whereas legitimacy refers to merely "a subjective state of mind" (p. 27). Insofar as workers operate within the "rules of the game" as established by capitalists, they are interpellated and come to local subjectivity within their bosses' terms. Nothing they say, no extraneous meanings, can change this fact.

This focus on shop floor practices has clear payoffs. It enables him to separate bravado from resistance. It enables him to distinguish trickery for survival's sake from working to change a larger system. Making these two distinctions enables Burawoy to explicate industrial workers' deep implication in their own shop floor subjugation from the perspective of the shop floor and from within the context of advanced capitalism. However, by focusing on actions, rather than on what workers make of them, he once again reads the ethnographic data through a theoretical lens that would make countervailing evidence hard to catch.

Despite Burawoy's protestations, the meanings embedded in labor control practices are crucial to his analysis. He takes as a theoretical given that workers are interpellated primarily as "creators" and not as "men" (see Knights and Willmott 1989). Thus, although he ostensibly focuses on practices alone and ignores meanings, he actually focuses on both. The difference is that practices are investigated, whereas meanings are established by theoretical fiat. This analytical structure removes any tools he might use to distinguish which meanings and subjectivities are at play—or not—in the structure he investigates. Thus, his refusal to explicitly investigate meanings makes it difficult to respond to challenges to his interpretation of meanings, or even to assess their accuracy. Like his con-

² See my *Gender under Production: Making Subjects in Mexico's Global Factories* (forthcoming) for an example of an analysis that brings gender centrally into the story, not by breaking the link between local structure and emergent subjectivity, but by understanding gendered meanings and subjectivities as a fundamental aspect of shop floor structure.

³ Burawoy does smuggle gender in under the rubric of "family" in his discussion of early cotton industries in *Politics of Production* (1985), but he never theorizes the gendering of production itself except as mediated through the family.

⁴ David Knights and Hugh Willmott (1989) made this insightful point in their critique of Burawoy.

⁵ See for instance, "The idiom in which workers couch and rationalize their behavior is no necessary guide to the patterns of their actual behavior" (Burawoy 1979:138).

cepts of structure and subjectivity, his focus on practices to the exclusion of the meanings within which they occur makes invisible the role of gendered meanings and subjectivities in production.

The power of Burawoy's analysis lies in his unusual commitment to actually tracing the processes through which subjectivity emerges within the context of local social relations. However, his opening assumptions make this strength a weakness as well, as it leads him to take for granted that, because production is not a gendered or racialized process, the subjectivities that emerge within it are also ungendered or unracialized. Thus, *Manufacturing Consent's* most fundamental contribution to the study of work, that of bringing worker subjectivity to the fore, is also its greatest failing, as Burawoy's overall theoretical framework keeps him from recognizing the many elements that actually constitute shop floor subjectivity.

Do these problems ultimately negate the book's arguments? I think not. Every account of social reality is partial. Burawoy himself would not claim to have told the whole sto-

ry, simply to have included all elements relevant to the argument at hand. However, precisely because of the compelling nature of the narrative, *Manufacturing Consent* has a totalizing quality. Thus, the very elegance of formulation, both the specific elements of subjectivity attended to and the parsimony of explanation, can be misleading, obscuring important elements of social process, experience, and political possibility and mystifying the role of gender and race in constituting capitalist domination.

The book's fundamental insight, that subjectivity matters in production and varies with shifts in its structure, continues to illuminate processes that too often are opaque to those who live them. Anyone who has taught this book to students with experience in the workplace can attest to the "aha!" moment it engenders. Nonetheless, today, two decades after its emergence, we must continue to read and teach *Manufacturing Consent*, but do so with care, lest, in sidelining categories of domination beyond class, it further undermines the liberatory project that inspired it.

Donald Roy—Sociologist and Working Stiff

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Howard Becker (2000) recently lamented the burial of our ethnographic treasures. He urged us to dig up the gems and polish them until they sparkle. I agree that we should resuscitate our ancestors but to exalt them, to put them on a pedestal, is to freeze them in time and to miss what makes them significant for the present. I'm delighted that none of the foregoing reflections on *Manufacturing Consent* indulge in such uncritical adulation but instead build on its errors, transcend its limitations, problematize its assumptions, question its logic, break through its blinkers, and situate its weakness in the myopia of its time. That is how we move forward, reconstructing ancient works to better fit the contemporary

world and in so doing connecting the past to the present.

I follow the lead of these retrospective essays in reflecting on the work of my own predecessor, the famous industrial sociologist, Donald Roy whose Chicago Ph.D. dissertation analyzed the same piecework machine shop which, 30 years later, became the basis of *Manufacturing Consent*. In these comments, I consider the career of this industrial plant between 1944–45 and 1974–75, but also the career of its original ethnographer. After he left Chicago in 1950, Roy wrestled with the strictures of his inherited Chicago-style, bounded ethnography as he sought to locate microprocesses in their broader historical, political, and economic context. Alone and ahead of his time, he explored issues that preoccupy us today—homelessness, gender and sexuality at work, despotic management,

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